DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 270 774 CS 209 825

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TITLE Directing the Drama: Mass Media's Dramaturgical Role.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (69th, Norman, OK, August 3-6, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiences; *Drama; *Mass Media; *Mass Media Effects; Media Research; Role Perception; Social Attitudes; Social Cognition
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Response; *Dramaturgical Role; Media Role

ABSTRACT

The shaping of social reality has become the task of the mass media due to the fact that audience members base interaction and social judgments upon the information they process from the mass media. Theorists have developed various paradigms linking individual media use and interpersonal communication with cultural effects and mass media. Although many of these have emphasized the development of new approaches, the development of a totally new perspective may not be necessary. The dramaturgical orientation as developed by K. Burke and I. Goffman could, with the inclusion of mass media content as director variable, effectively allow for cohesive research tying cultural creation with media use. The dramaturgical orientation treats all social interaction as if it were drama, with individuals acting out roles in different scenes for different purposes. The major drawback of using the dramaturgical approach as a research paradigm is that it has not traditionally been studied using quantitative measures. However, the addition of the mass media content as a variable in the drama offers more quantifiable data for analysis and correlation. (DF)

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Directing the Drama:

Mass Media's Dramaturgical Role

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Presented to the Mass Communication and Society Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, August 1986, Norman, OK

Running Head: Media Director

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Directing the Drama: Mass Media's Dramaturgical Role

The creation of social reality has become the task — sometimes deliberately, sometimes inadvertently — of the mass media. Audience members are basing social interaction and social judgments upon the information they process from the mass media. Kim Smith, in a study of Louisville, Kentucky, residents (1984), found that they ranked the mass media (radio, television and the daily newspaper) as the most important influence on community life, ranking the media ahead of all other institutions. Theoreticians have consistently called for a paradigm linking individual media use and interpersonal communication with cultural effects and mass media messages. (See White, 1983, for an overview of recent integrative efforts.) Many of these have emphasized the development of new approaches, but the development of a totally new perspective may not be necessary. The dramaturgical orientation as developed by Kenneth Burke and Erving Goffman could, with the inclusion of mass media content as a director variable, effectively allow for cohesive research tying cultural creation with media use. The perspective could also offer a theoretical framework for gatekeeping analysis as well.

The Dramaturgical Perspective

The dramaturgical orientation treats all social interaction as if it were drama, with individuals acting out roles within

differing scenes for different purposes. Burke explores the symbolic nature of communication and interpretation and says meaning comes through a process (Mitchell, 1978). Burke described the dramatic action using a pentad of elements: act, agency, scene, agent and purpose, all of which worked together to explain the motivation for actions (1969, Introduction). "He does not tell us simply what symbols do in communication, but how they do what he says they do" (Duncan, 1962, p. 114). Burke treated the interrelationships between elements as ratios which reflect the differing influences elements could assume: Burke explained:

> [A]n 'agent-act'ratio would reflect the correspondence between a man's character and the character of this behavior (as, in a drama, the principles of formal consistency require that each member of the dramatis personae act in character, although such correspondences in art can have a perfection not often found in life) (1976, p. 8).

Goffman said that each actor or person may have several parts to present, and may choose to believe in the role or not do so. He said "a performer will tend to conceal or underplay those activities, facts or motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of himself and his products" (p. 48). Burke said the perceived scene would set the nature of the action for the actor, and Goffman pointed out that there were some roles that become so institutionalized that the role takes on a life of its own and the actor's choices are diminished or altered. This interpretation of the situation is part of a projection, then, fostered through

social cooperation, a cooperation from those whom Goffman calls "the team" (p. 77) but whom could also be called a primary or secondary reference group.

Others have noted the perception of the scene as a key element in human behaviors and attitudes. In a seminal book discussing the mediating influences of social perception, Walter Lippmann (1922) postulated that media-transmitted information created a pseudo-environment in which and through which individuals interact with each other, social groups and governing bodies.

> Looking back we can see how indirectly we know the environment in which nevertheless we live. We can see that the news of it comes to us now fast, now slowly; but that whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat as if it were the environment itself (p. 4)

Neither Burke nor Goffman dealt explicitly with this role of the media as Lippmann saw it, the role of the carrier of social information and the director of social attention. Goffman does, however, include in his perspective a role for a director whom he saw as arising through role performance. "When one examines a team performance, one often finds that someone is given the right to direct and to control the progress of the dramatic action" (p. 97). This director could, in Goffman's view, assume an actual performing role or simply act off-stage, as it were, in a sanctioning or soothing role for the other performers.

> First, the director may be given the special duty of bringing back into line any member of the team whose performance becomes

> unsuitable. . . . Secondly, the director may be given the special duty of allocating parts in the performance and the personal front [scene and props] that is employed in each part. . . (pp. 98-99).

The director would be treated differently than other team members because of this responsibility, playing what Goffman called "a marginal role between audience and performers" (p. 99).

The similarities between the duties of Goffman's director and the content of mass media are apparent when one looks at the relationship of audiences and the mass media. First, the avid use of the mass media, particularly the electronic media, points to a consenting audience ready to be directed, or at least ready to receive mass media messages. Snow says that a media culture "has been created through a willing participation of people on both sides of the communication process — professional communicator and audience member" (p. 225). Thus, a team is created.

Secondly, the role-casting aspects of media content have been noted by both media and sociological researchers. Warren Breed (1956, p. 187) said the media reinforce tradition and explain new roles "by expressing, dramatizing, and repeating cultural patterns." C. Wright Mills, sociologist, saw the media acting not only to form external roles but also internal images:

> The media have not only filtered into our experiences of external realities, they have also entered into our very experience of our own selves. . . . In terms of the modern theory of the self, we may say that the media bring the reader,

> listener, viewer into the sight of larger, higher reference groups, real or imagined, up-close or vicarious, personally known or vicariously glimpsed — which are looking glasses for his self image (1965, p. 34).

Boland and Young, in a paper delivered at the 1972 American Sociological Convention, said that ours is a dramaturgic society, one in which behavior and consciousness of people are shaped and managed by the technology of the theater, of the behavioral sciences, and of mass communications.

Thirdly, the sanctioning aspect of media content was noted by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton (1948) who said the media exert pressure on social deviants to conform with majority morality directly or by mobilizing the public to exert such pressure. They said the media have status-conferral functions, asserting that as the media recognize, report and portray people, organizations, issues and movements, they become legitimate, i.e. a part is created for them in the drama of social reality. Dean W. O'Brien, in a monograph News As Environment (1983, p. 9), said that "a newspaper serves as a souvenir of community experience, authenticating it and being authenticated by it."

The role of the electronic media in affecting perceptions of reality cognitively has been studied by James Chesebro (1984). He said selective use of the media, through the seeking and retaining of only certain stimuli by the audience, created a selective perception of reality which then stimulated cognitive patterns that become

habitual. These habitual mental attitudes then lead to a selective world view which embodies a group of values chosen by the media, based on what Altheide and Snow (1979, pp. 7-12) have called "media logic." Thus media values become a part of the audience and culture, directing, at least in part, and determining moral values.

Doris Graber (1985) also has studied cognitive effects of media use, using an information-processing approach, and found that readers of newspapers develop schemas into which they then fit content based on cues from the media such as headlines and story placement. The mental images were then used by the audience as filters of information flow; information that did not fit the pattern was discarded or ignored.

O'Brien said: "Reporting is said to be objective not when its words and images accurately represent the environment but, more pragmatically, when they coincide with symbols in the minds of significant publics. . ." (1983, p. 1)

The role of media content in role definition and behavioral sanctioning is perhaps best illustrated through the research of the Cultural Indicators project of the University of Pennsylvania. Gerbner et al (1980) related the incidences of the construct of a new social reality or scene to the frequency of television viewing by an individual, finding that that one variable has more impact on subsequent social attitudes and value schema than do such demographic factors as education and race. The heavy viewer, one who watches more than four hours of television a day, saw the world as a hostile

place where one will soon become a victim of aggression and crime. The heavy viewer described female roles in the most traditional sense of housekeeping. One will generally believe in maintaining racially-segregated communities, and will overstate the incidence of family discord. This is true, the researchers say, because of the high incidence of such attitudes and behaviors on television. In effect, then, the television becomes the major instrument for acculteration in the country.

Fourthly, the uneasy role of the director as described by Goffman is also apparent within the audience's perception of the media's role. Some evidence indicates that the public wants the media to direct their attention and to divert their attention. Donahue, Tichenor and Olien (1973) found evidence that a majority of the American public did not want the media to cover the My Lai incident. "While some citizens did refuse to believe that the massacre occurred, the more striking poll finding is that a majority believed it should never have been reported" (pp. 658-659). Daniel Boorstin (1964) said the audience wanted to be deceived about reality because of a desire for entertainment and diversion. O'Brien (1983, p. 15) concurs:

> There are hints in recent studies of news viewing and reading to suggest that a significant share of the audience is comforted by the predictable, earnest drone of hard news treatment but pays little attention to its content, in keeping with the nature of authority-centered pseudoenvironments and reminiscent of the child's need for parental presence and stability . . .

A Washington Post survey found somewhat contradictory evidence of public perception of media performance during an opinion survey of 1,507 people in July 1981. More than half of the people polled said the news media hold back important news, yet more than 85 percent said the media did a good or excellent job, and said they believed the media more than the government.

Media personnel themselves seem uneasy about their roles as directors of public attention through content selection. Gatekeeping studies of news decision-making and decision-makers have flourished in the past decades, using different methodologies and asking different questions.[1] Several media groups, including the Associated Press Managing Editors and The Society of Professional Journalists, publish a yearly report on newsroom ethics and proper behaviors in which they explore how the power of the newswriter and editor should best be handled. Yet the way this power should be handled has not yet been determined. In a speech delivered in May 1982 to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Michael J. O'Neill described the power of modern journalists:

> No longer are we just the messengers, observers on the sidelines, witch's mirrors faithfully telling society how it looks. Now we are deeply imbedded in the democratic process itself, as principal actors rather than bit players or mere audience. No longer do we merely cover the news. Thanks mainly to television, we are often partners now in the creation of news — unwilling and unwitting partners, perhaps, but partners nonetheless in producing what Daniel Boorstin has deplored as pseudo-events, pseudo-protests, pseudo-crises and controversies.

So, it may be concluded that mass media content now acts, at least in these ways, as the director of the dramatic interaction of the individual and his environment, acting as the shapers of the images the public uses and acts upon as reality as the scene for action. Expanding Burke's pentad into a hexad to include the role of media content as director overtly would allow for study into the interaction of the individual, the media and the culture through one integrative approach. One should be cautious, however, about seeing the director as being the element of ultimate responsibility or causality in the communication process; as one of the elements of the hexad, the director would be affected and would affect the other elements in ratios similar to the ones previously suggested by Burke. Secondly, one should be cautious of developing a one-to-one relationship between the theatrical role of a director and the hexadic role of the content. While there are overall similarities, the relationship must be studied within the symbolic framework as should other pentadic elements.

Research Areas

The dramaturgical orientation can then be used as a framework for finding appropriate methods or approaches for analyzing the media/culture relationship. For example, White (1983) isolated four dimensions of this relationship that need investigating: the relation of structural conditions and communication patterns; reorganization of cultural meanings and new language development; sociocultural change and technology changes; and analysis of the

movement from innovations to institutionalization (pp. 297-299). Taking the dramaturgical idea of element ratios, the relation between the structure of the media themselves and the patterns of subsequent communications could be studied as a scene-act ratio. Since the nature of the act should be consistent with the scene, the communication between the medium and the audience should vary according to medium type and individual motivation, as currently explored from the uses-and-gratifications perspective. For example, one could investigate the influence of the corporatization of the newspaper industry on message selection and message attention, both from the perspective of the audience and the gatekeeper. To investigate the relationship between the cultural meaning and language development, the act-agency ratio could be used, where the act is the meaning and the development is the agency. Diffusion research could be attempted then from this perspective; motives for the act could be studied as well as the logistics of creating shared meanings through symbolic communication. The relation between communication technology and subsequent cultural change could be studied as an agency-purpose ratio, looking at the means-end relationship pragmatically, as in the effect the purchase of a home satellite dish might have on familial interaction or in the effect on social attitudes when cable's narrowcasting is introduced into the home environment. Historical studies would also be possible from this perspective. As Burke noted (p. 13), "we might well expect expect new experimental conditions to reveal new kinds of behavior."

Lastly, the movement from innovations to institutionalization could be studied either as a scene-act ratio, asking how personal definition of situations become internalized as in the studies of professional socialization, or as an act-scene ratio, where the action of message reception and internalization is measured to see how it was manifested in specific behaviors, as in marketing studies. Various other combinations of the ratios could be applied to each of these areas as one of the major values the dramaturgical perspective offers is its heuristic application.

Other media theories could be studied from this orientation; for example, the relationship between this perspective and Elisabeth Noelle-Newmann's Spiral of Silence theory (1974) could be explored. In the theory, it is postulated that the fear of social isolation is a major determinent of public communication. One would not communicate those messages perceived to be in the minority viewpoint unless one was a hardcore enthusiast. Noelle-Newmann linked this process to the perception of public opinion gathered from mass media messages that were consonant, ubiquitious and cumulative. This is closely akin to the dramaturgical perspective of agents acting out perceived social roles and concealing those activities or facts that would disrupt the performance. Goffman said that some facts must be overcommunicated and some facts undercommunicated in order to maintain the reality of the performance (p. 141). Again, one should note the directing aspect of the mass media in this theory. Noelle-Newmann said that mass media "provide the environmental pressure to which people respond with alacrity,

or with acquiescence, or with silence" (p. 51). Such a relationship might be studied using a survey methodology combined with a media content analysis to determine what the media had reported on an issue. The apparent willingness to offer opinions on subjects of controversy should positively correlate with media judgment and content about the issue, if the dramaturgical and spiral approaches are adequate explanations for social communications.

The audience response to "bad news" could also be studied from this perspective. Looking at such a message as one might analyze a traditional dramatic tragedy would provide an interesting focus to see if agents act according to clues. What types of clues are given for "bad news"? Are agents more willing to communicate bad news or good news while playing their roles as media gatekeepers? (See Jack Haskins, 1981, for a survey of what is known about audience response to bad-news messages.) Again, to investigate this area, content analysis of local media would be necessary to determine what bad news or tragic cues or messages had been delivered. Then field observation and survey methodology could be used to see how overt behaviors and covert attitudes were affected by the traagic content. Currently, the Ethiopian famine would provide a bad-news topic for investigation. How have audience attitudes and actions in regards to the world hunger situation changed as a result of media exposure and social interaction? Have members of the audience been cast in a new role as social activists in response to the newly presented roles of rock musicians as activists?

Political communication can also be studied from this perspective, through analysis of the ways the media create images of political candidates and set agendas for sensitive issues. Seeking the dominant themes of campaigns as portrayed in the media will allow for analysis of the reception and comprehension of media messages; studies of subsequent voting behaviors as in the work by Bormann, Koester and Bennett (1978) would allow measurement of this "directing" behavior of the media. Such analysis would allow for a combination of the "humanistic concerns of the dramatists and symbolic interactionists with the rigor of behavioral models" (Combs and Mansfield, 1976, p. 29).

Lastly, the dramaturgical perspective offers a valuable perspective from which to study the role of agents within the mass media industries. The acceptance of roles, the interpretation of cues and the definition of purpose for their profession are all areas of consequence, not only for the agents themselves but for the audiences they direct through their choices of media content. The role of the owners and managers of the mass media could also be studied from this perspective, using the elements of the hexad as a framework.

Discussion

The dramaturgical approach has one major drawback as a research paradigm in that it has not traditionally been studied using quantitative meaures. However, the addition of the mass media content as a variable in the drama offers more quantifiable data for analysis and correlation. This is not to suggest, however, that one should abandon qualitative study. Some dramatic elements within the interplay of individuals and the media or individuals and society cannot readily be quantified,

and yet they are worthy of scholarly consideration. This perspective offers tools for both types of analysis.

The applicability of the dramaturgical approach to other cultures has not yet been proven. On the face, it would seem that in any developed nation with widespread media use, the media heavily influence public perception of reality, as the work of German Noelle-Neumann suggests. Yet it must be investigated to see if the elements of the dramatic hexad are applicable, and to determine the extent of influence media content has on role identification and social cues within less-developed nations.

The acceptance of the role of media content as a significant variable in the symbolic theater of communication allows for the study of perhaps the one element that is the same across personal reference groups and social ties. Content of national, state and local media is not at this stage user-specific. Including this variable offers a base of similarity from which to then approach the more individual influences on behavior and communication within society from a dramaturgical perspective.

Footnote

1. Atwood, L.E. and Grotta, G.l. Socialization of news values in beginning reporters. Journalism Quarterly, 1973, 50, 296-297; Bass, A.Z. Refining the "gatekeeper" concept: a UN radio case study. Journalism Quarterly, 1969, 46, 69-72; Brown, R.M. The gatekeeper reassessed: a return to Lewin. Journalism Quarterly, 1979, 56, 595-601, 679; Burgoon, Burgoon and Atkin. What is news? Who decides? And how? Washington: ANPA, May 1982; Dimmick, J. The gatekeeper: an uncertainty theory. Journalism Monographs, Nov. 1974, No. 37; Donahew, L. Newspaper gatekeepers and forces in the news channel. Public Opinion Quarterly, 1967, 31, 61-68; Garrison, B. The electronic gatekeeper: editing on the copy desk of a metropolitan newspaper. Newspaper Research Journal, 1980, 1, 7-17; Ismach, A.H. & Dennis, E.E. A profile of newspaper and television reporters in a metropolitan setting. Journalism Quarterly, 1978, 55, 739-743, 898; Johnstone, Slawski & Bowman. The professional values of American newsman. Public Opinion Quarterly, 1972, 36, 522-540; ————————, The News People. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois, 1976; White, D.M. The "gatekeeper": a cast study in the selection of news. Journalism Quarterly, 1950, 27, 383-390.

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